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MOVE OVER, PET ROCK

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WASHINGTON - Nothing fires up the human soul quite so much as a secret.

When people get their grubbles around something they're not supposed to know, they feel devilishly good about themselves and the sun shines brighter.

Army Maj. William Tobin, who is probably one of the few people in the Defense Department with a sense of humor, knows the human soul well and is building a brisk cottage industry around it. For the past three months, this native of Whitman, Mass., and graduate of Northeastern University has been hauling home garbage bags full of shredded secret documents, packing them into Lucite boxes and selling them to the insatiable American curiosity for \$3.95 apiece (\$6 mail order).

"It's the new pet rock," Tobin said smiling broadly as he leaned against a kitchen counter in his home in Chevy Chase, Md. Behind him sat a bag of shred and in front of him on the table were neat rows of newly packed containers, each with a date and signed certification of authenticity. He and his wife, Patricia, who grew up in Concord, Mass., get together with a couple of friends on a Saturday and pack about 300 boxes. They also pack at night after work.

Tobin, who was transferred to Washington from Germany last August, said he got the idea for selling his "secret souvenirs of Washington," while talking with associates at work.

"We all thought it sounded great but nobody wanted to try it," Tobin recalled. "They told me I'd never be able to get permission. I figured it wouldn't hurt to try."

Tobin's work is classified, so he can't give too many details about exactly what he does except that he is involved in war games and battle simulations. Like many government offices, Tobin's department generates waste paper that can't be pitched willy-nilly into the nearest basket. It has to be shredded, diced, burned, treated with chemicals, or sent to locked vaults where it can never be read by enemy eyes.

Tobin spent several months getting the OK from his superiors in the Pen-



tagon to take home the scraps of documents that have been run through what's known as a "class B shredder." That's a machine that cuts the paper into thin little strips rather than dicing it. The documents are classified as "secret and below," meaning they are either secret papers, confidential ones, or "eyes only" memos. The mix does not include anything that has been labeled "top secret."

"There's no impropriety here," said Tobin who, at age 40, still has the scrubbed look and enthusiasm of a new recruit. "I went through all the proper channels and do this strictly on my own time."

He has sold about 1000 of his gift items since December, mostly wholesale to area bookstores, stationery stores and novelty shops. He said some business people who sell paper shredders are using his boxes for promotion and that he is negotiating a contract with the shops at Dulles and National Airport. He has plans for a kids' version that will have a secret decoder ring inside and for an executive desk set model with a pencil sharpener.

"People around the country have no idea what the bureaucracy is like in Washington," said Tobin. "They hear about the deficit, the budget, the Pentagon, but they never see it. This gives them a little piece of America."

Tobin said that government types are also going for the shreds.

"Military guys are saying 'Hey, this is a riot, I've got to have one,'" Tobin noted. "A surgeon at the National Institutes of Health called me and ordered one. I also heard from a guy in Japan who wants to order a bunch of them but has to have the information on the Lucite container translated into Japanese. I'm not sure what I'm going to do about him."

"My wife and I get a real kick out of this," said Tobin, who has named his company "Nibot Inovations Ltd." (Nibot is Tobin spelled backwards.) "We started it as

kind of a lark to see if we could do it and if anybody would want to buy these things. Then we were in the Washington Post and on "CBS Morning News" and our phone didn't stop ringing. I still can't believe it."